

2013 NC

## All-America Cities



The new Garner Veterans' Memorial, dedicated in May, was one of the projects highlighted in the town's All-America City application. Photo credit: City of Garner

### Garner

**A**fter becoming an All-America City, Garner is an even greater place to be.

According to Rick Mercier, Garner's public information officer, the competition taught the town a lot about what the community was doing to make Garner better. Even though it's a fast-growing suburb of Raleigh, Mercier said everybody still knows each other in Garner.

"Garner is like a community of neighbors," Mercier said. "People look out for each other and are accountable to each other. I think that makes us a really special place."

In the application, Garner focused on citizen initiatives that improve the town's quality of life.

#### *Veterans' Memorial*

Dedicated in May, the Veterans' Memorial is the product of a grassroots community effort to, in the words of the organizers, "provide a memorial that pays tribute to our veterans but not to create a memorial which glorifies war."

Individuals, civic and veterans' organizations and local businesses have raised the funds to build the \$500,000-project, which has pillars with the names of 67 Garner-area veterans who died serving the country. The committee overseeing the planning, fundraising and

implementation of the project wanted to involve the entire community, so selling memorial bricks and benches has been a centerpiece of the grassroots campaign. Nearly 700 memorial bricks and 12 benches were sold to raise about \$125,000, a quarter of the cost of the project.

The memorial is at Lake Benson Park, Garner's town common. The park receives an estimated 200,000 visitors annually, and an adjacent park, connected to Lake Benson Park by walking and biking trails, receives another nearly 16,000 visitors to its Nature Center.



### *Community of Hope*

In 2004, the Wake County school system approached First Baptist Church with a need: help struggling elementary students in danger of falling behind academically. First Baptist became one of three Wake County groups to earn the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, a federal program to help elementary school students who are behind in reading or math.

The church started Community of Hope Ministries in 2004. Community of Hope Ministries collaborates with six Garner-area elementary schools to identify at-risk students. On average, only 66 percent of students in these schools are performing at grade level. Hundreds of students have participated in the program through the years.

As the leadership and volunteers worked to serve the at-risk students in the after-school program, a very real truth was unveiled: children in need are often indicative of families in need. This realization identified other needs, like a food pantry. The pantry has provided more than 381,613 meals in the past five years. Community of Hope also provides other programs including Carpenter's Hands, Camp Courage and Transitional Housing Ministry.

#### *Cultural development*

For many years, Garner residents had few local opportunities for cultural

and arts experiences. Several grassroots efforts began to fill this void, and their successes set the stage for what is now a vibrant arts and cultural economy supported by both the public and private sector.

When Garner's historic 1921 school building was slated for demolition, a group of citizens rallied to save it and created the Garner Historic Auditorium. Another group of citizens started a community theater group, The Towne Players, which is currently in its 15th year. In 2007, the Towne Players partnered with the Town of Garner to create a summer theater camp program that serves 120 campers per year and provides scholarships to ensure the camps are available to all. In addition to theater skills, the camps are credited with building self confidence in an inclusive atmosphere. Another Garner resident developed a program to bring some of Broadway's biggest shows to the local stage. A public-private partnership raises more than \$30,000 annually to make the Broadway Voices series possible.

The success of these award-winning, citizen-created initiatives led the Town of Garner to implement a strategic cultural arts plan in 2011.

Even Scotty McCreery, Garner native and 2011 American Idol, helped the town secure the award. He

wasn't able to travel to Denver for the competition, but he did participate in the video contest and made a cash donation to help with travel expenses for the other 44 delegates. Garner also won the most-viewed video award.

Mercier said he thinks the judges were moved by the delegates' stories, especially that of fallen Garner veteran Henry Sanchez, who inspired the Veterans' Memorial.

"The greatest thing for me was seeing how our delegates bonded," Mercier said. "We're going to keep this team together, and that will help us envision where we want Garner to go."

The town celebrated the award during its Fourth of July celebration and is working on using the All-America City logo on marketing materials.

However, Garner has a lot of planning to do. Earlier this year, it passed a bond referendum that will allow the town to borrow \$35.7 million, one and a half times the operating budget, for upgrades over the next decade. Mercier said the town will build sidewalks and greenways to connect parks, schools and neighborhoods; get a new recreation center, town hall and police station; and make road improvements and land purchases to redevelop downtown.

"Hopefully this will energize others to get involved in the community,"

Mercier said. "Over the next seven years, I think you'll be seeing a lot of change in Garner."